

Craftsmen, Artisans, & Tradesmen



THERE WAS NOT MUCH ROOM on the first ships to America. Early settlers brought with them only a small amount of furniture, clothes, tools, kitchenware, and other goods for their new homes. When they arrived in the New World, they found no shops or factories to provide them with goods, so they had to make whatever else they needed themselves or wait for another ship from England to arrive with more supplies.

A lot of colonists did depend on England for fabric and clothing, furniture, iron tools, and other supplies. Since most of the colonies were settled to provide the mother country with raw materials, these colonists could trade their raw materials, such



Winterthur Museum

A room at Winterthur Museum contains the woodworking shop of the Dominy family of East Hampton, New York. Beginning in the mid-1700s, three generations of family members made furniture, clock cases, and mill parts in the carpenter's shop and clock gears and movements in a clock shop alongside their home. Both shops were re-created with their original equipment.

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as pine tar, turpentine, tobacco, and wood, for goods made in England. But not all colonists had products to sell to England or could afford imported goods, so many made what they needed themselves. The men cut down trees and used lumber from them to build their homes and furniture. The women made soap and candles and grew flax and raised sheep to provide linen and wool thread to weave into cloth.

Skills for a New World

Many of the earliest settlers were skilled craftsmen when they arrived. The first blacksmith in America was James Reed, who arrived in Jamestown in 1607. Blacksmiths were among the most important craftsmen because they could repair the tools, chains, and other imported iron products colonists depended on. They also made fireplace andirons and sometimes forged new ax blades to cut wood, chains to haul lumber, and even nails to build houses. Women relied on the blacksmith to mend and make pot handles, forks, ladles, hooks, and cooking spits.

John Alden came to Plymouth in 1630 on the Mayflower. He was a cooper, someone who made tubs, pails, and barrels. Benjamin Franklin's father, Josiah, who came to this country in 1638, was a dyer (someone who colored newly woven cloth) but found little demand for his trade. He became a tallow chandler (candle maker) and soap boiler instead. At age ten, Ben worked in his father's Boston shop, cutting wicks for the candles and filling the molds.

Many goods were imported from England. The British government even imposed laws that made it difficult for colonial craftsmen to produce things that English merchants wished to sell to them. But the growing need for material goods encouraged more and more people to try their hands at various crafts in the New World. Men who might never have dared to open shops as masters in England became chandlers, tailors, shoemakers, and such in the colonies.

Self Taught and Homemade

To supplement the limited imported goods available, the settlers made many necessities in the home. Self-taught woodworkers made farm and household items from wood, the most abundant raw material. Among these items were plows,



BLACKSMITH



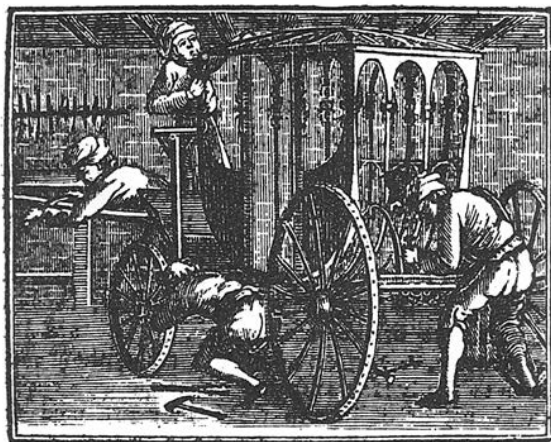
COOPER



SHOEMAKER



BRICK MAKER



COACH MAKER

bowls, kitchen utensils, and furniture. Over the years, cabinetmaking became one of the most successful early American crafts.

Women and children in most rural households used the spinning wheel to make woolen thread from the fleece of family sheep and linen thread from homegrown flax. Men wove the thread into clothing, bedding, and table linens. In Virginia, a traveling weaver sometimes spent months at a planter's home weaving cloth for the family.

As settlements began to prosper, colonists were able to pay to have things made for them, and persons skilled in a craft found they could make a living from their trade, although many had to work at more than one trade to make ends meet. Carpenters in rural areas also served as cabinetmakers, wagon makers, and coffin makers. The early craftsman working out of his home and, later, a nearby shop often needed a sideline or two if business was not steady enough.

The nature of some trades required craftsmen to go where the work was. An itinerant cobbler carried his tools, leather, and small workbench on his back, repairing footwear in people's homes. Tinkers, handymen who traveled with kits called "pigs," repaired small household items and carried molds to produce, among other things, pewter buttons and spoons. Traveling candle makers sometimes went from house to house with their molds, offering their services to families who had stored up grease to be made into candles.

From Simple to Elaborate

Before very long, goods that had once been luxuries became staples, and the number and variety of craftsmen grew. The products they made often differed from colony to colony. A silversmith in a large city was more likely to make large, elaborate items that the city's wealthy population could buy, while his fellow craftsman in the country might have spent more time making small items, repairing larger ones, and importing a few more elaborate

pieces for those who wanted them. Cabinetmakers in Philadelphia produced fancy decorated furniture, but those in Virginia found that their customers preferred well-built, less ornamented pieces. Although there were many similarities in the work of craftsmen around the colonies, there also were differences in style and methods of work because of the colonists' different backgrounds.

The best craftsmen gathered in well-to-do coastal cities such as New York and Philadelphia where the large population could support them. By 1647, Boston boasted professional weavers, leather workers, felt makers, furriers, rope makers, and brick and tile makers. Further growth drew even more craftspeople to the colonies. A shipload of Irish immigrants arriving at Boston in 1716 included, among the men, an anchor and ship smith, house carpenter, ship joiner (carpenter), carver, cooper, shoemaker, currier (leather tanner), tailor, book printer, nailer, and locksmith. The women included a milliner (hat maker), ribbon weaver, lace weaver, button maker, and potter.

Metalworkers included coppersmiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths, and tin-smiths who had learned their trades in Europe. Many worked with several metals. Braziers (who worked with brass) produced pots, pans, door knockers, and other items. Plumbers worked with lead, often rolling or casting it into pipes.

Workers in wood were vital to the colonies. They built homes, furniture, tools, and household wooden ware. Early settlers had made their own tools, wooden ware, and furniture, as well as their homes and barns. As craftsmen specialized, the sawyer squared tree logs with his broadax to make planks. The carpenter assembled the beams, rafters, walls, and floors of a house, followed by the joiner who added the window moldings, stairs, and wood trim work. Carvers created decorative trim for houses, figureheads for ships, tools, gunstocks, and shop signs. Cabinetmakers crafted furniture, from simple, functional stools and tables to intricate pieces that remain among the finest examples of American craftsmanship.

By the late 1700s, Americans produced much of what they needed, but many goods were still imported. After the Revolutionary War, colonial craftsmen became American craftsmen. For many, their work continued unchanged into the nineteenth century.



POTTER



PRINTER



A master wheelwright often had an apprentice.

The Apprentice System

Based on the English model, the apprentice system trained most boys and some girls in a craft that would become their livelihood. At about age fourteen, a youngster was bound over to a master craftsman. A written contract between the child's parents and the master, called an indenture, usually promised that the child would serve the master for seven years, although the length of time could vary. In return, the master promised to teach the new apprentice his trade. The master also was obliged to teach the youngster how to read and write or to allow him to attend evening school to acquire such learning.

The everyday life of the trainee was not easy. Imagine, for example, the apprentice pewterer beginning his day before sunup, stoking the fire in the forge. He would assist his master all day, preparing and preheating molds, and then holding them in the fire while his teacher filled them with melted pewter. When the casting was withdrawn from the

mold, the apprentice would help remove any extra bits of metal and smooth the surface of the new plate or pot. The apprentice would then burnish and polish the object. Other daily duties included cleaning the workplace.

When the shop was closed at day's end, the apprentice would eat, and then the master would teach him to read, write, and do sums. Or the master might send the boy to a privately run evening school where he would learn these basic skills as well as some others, such as bookkeeping.

Toward the end of the apprenticeship, the boy would submit an apprentice piece to his master. If this satisfied the master, the latter would sign off on the indenture, and the apprentice would become a journeyman, the next step to becoming a master craftsman. Given a "freedom suit" of new clothes by his master and often a set of tools appropriate to his trade, the fledgling journeyman would set out to find new work and continue his education in the craft.